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ABSTRACT

Individuals who wish to become community college presidents should take the following steps to prepare for the presidency: (1) get their doctorate; (2) get into the academic pipeline running from the classroom to the division chair, the dean of instruction, and the presidency; (3) find a good mentor; (4) establish a peer network; (5) assume leadership roles on campus; (6) be willing to move to a new town; and (7) be willing to accept a position in a less than ideal locale. When applying for the presidency of a college, the applicant should be sure to follow all directions; submit a typed, letter-perfect application; prepare a letter of application specifically for the position; pay careful attention to the profile developed for the position; avoid unexplained gaps in employment history; list a current supervisor as a reference or explain why not; keep the letter of application concise; and be selective about applying for positions. During the interview, the applicant should refrain from criticizing his/her current president, be him/herself, be a good listener, avoid condescension, and be prepared to take the position if it is offered. Though following these suggestions will not guarantee that the applicant gets the position, they may help him/her avoid making needless errors. (AJL)

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ADVICE FOR THOSE WHO WOULD BE PRESIDENT

Southern Association of Community, Junior, and Technical Colleges

Occasional Paper, Volume 7, Number 1, January 1989

George B. Vaughan, Editor

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Occasional Paper

Southern Association of Community, Junior, and Technical Colleges

George B. Vaughan, Editor
Volume 7, Number 1, January, 1989

Advice For Those Who Would Be President

by George B. Vaughan

In a recent survey of the deans of instruction at the nation's community colleges, 333 of the 619 who returned the survey stated that their goal is to become a community college president. In addition to the deans of instruction, numerous other individuals have the community college presidency as a career goal. The following advice, offered with humility and good wishes, is based upon my personal judgment and the judgment of others, upon my professional experiences as a president, and upon my study of the community college presidency.

Preparing for the Presidency

Get the doctorate. Without the doctor's degree, a candidate's chances of becoming a president will be greatly lessened and indeed eliminated in many cases. One president, when asked a question regarding the pathway to the presidency, responded that "the doctorate is, in many cases, the key to the executive washroom. It's considered minimum." In spite of the fact that most presidencies today require the doctorate, some would-be presidents continue to dream that they will be the exception to the rule. With an increasing number of doctorates granted each year, governing boards do not have to, and few will, consider candidates without the doctorate.

Get into the academic pipeline. While one can make it to the presidency through routes other than the academic one, the odds of becoming a president increase if the academic path is followed, a point that is emphasized a number of times both in my book, *The Community College Presidency* (1986), and in a forthcoming book on the presidency to be published in the ACE/Macmillan series in 1989. More and more, search committees and governing boards require that presidents possess teaching experience. A successful president of a large community college in the East provides a useful perspective on teaching and the presidency. His advice: "I know that the short cut has been not to bother to teach for many younger presidents. I think that's a mistake. I really would encourage some teaching experience—full time—not just part time. I think my nine years of teaching before I became a dean were critical to my development." The academic pipeline leads from the classroom, to the division chair, to the dean of instruction, to the presidency.

Find a good mentor. Edmund J. Gleazer, Jr., former president of the AACJC, offers the following advice to those individuals who want to become a community college president. "Find two or three good mentors. You will find that there are some key people in the field; make it a point to get to know them. Try to get into the network; go to work for well known and competent people if you can." While most potential presidents will have difficulty finding even one good mentor, Gleazer's advice is nevertheless sound. If you feel you have outgrown a mentor, find an advocate who has the influence to help you and who is willing to go to bat on your behalf.

Establish a peer network. Gleazer's advice that you get into the network is important. Indeed, his concept of mentoring, as outlined above, is more concerned with becoming a part of a professional network than it is with finding a single mentor, although mentoring in the classical sense is important for some individuals. The effective leader establishes and maintains a network of peers who can offer valuable advice, suggest professional opportunities, and serve as professional contacts and references. Community colleges are by definition somewhat provincial; therefore, establishing a peer network requires a great deal of time and energy, but the payoff for those who want to be president is worth the effort.

Remember, leadership begins at home. Be visible on your own campus. Never miss an opportunity to address the faculty, but be sure you have something worthy of saying and be well prepared. Serve as the chair of important committees. One of the nation's leading community college presidents places involvement in campus activities at the top of his advice for those who want to become a president: "More than anything else, people need to become visible and demonstrate that they are workers and creative and willing to do things. Volunteer to serve on committees, put in extra time, do the extra work without griping about it or asking if you are going to be compensated. You will be quickly recognized, and you will be put into the channels to begin to move up." Take stands on important issues, especially those relating to the instructional program. Address the governing board whenever possible, remembering to give plenty of credit to the president. Be friendly with the board but not familiar. Develop a reputation for getting

things done on time and done well. Put your name on the reports and papers you produce. You never know when a document will be picked up and quoted both on and off campus, thereby increasing your visibility and reputation.

Never, ever, plan your career based upon what someone else might do. While generalizations are dangerous when dealing with anything as complex as moving into the community college presidency, I believe it is safe to say that far too many deans have missed their opportunity to become a president because they have waited around for the current president to leave or retire. People have a nasty habit of not retiring when they say they will. Moreover, most effective deans have made about as many enemies on campus as they have friends. Therefore, it often does not work out whereby the dean assumes the presidency on his or her own campus, especially relatively early in one's career.

Be willing to move. Most presidential vacancies are by definition somewhere else. The person who wants a presidency must be willing to move to a new campus, a new town, a new state. To be "place bound" often equates to being "career bound." One successful president who is in his second presidency offers the following advice regarding moving. "If you are not restricted to a certain area of the country, then pick an area where you think there will be growth and go there."

Be willing to move to the hinterlands. Most potential presidents have their Camelot college in mind; they would like to have their first presidency in a place where the quality of life is excellent, the cost of living reasonable, the college of high quality, and so on. Rarely is the ideal obtained in the first presidency. Do not, however, take a presidency just for the sake of becoming a president. The "fit" should be right for you and the college; and the position, while perhaps not the ultimate one, should be professionally rewarding. Take a position in the hinterlands, do an outstanding job, and make plans to move to Camelot. Incidentally, you will probably find that you like that college in Rural Retreat or Milltown or any number of other locations off the beaten track much better than you think you will, and you will likely stay there much longer than you had expected to stay.

Applying for the Position: The First Official Act

William H. Meardy, former director of the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), offers sound advice to presidential applicants. The following is from his editorial, "A Shot in the Foot: Advice for Presidential Applicants."

> An all too common mistake, made by all too many applicants, is that they either do not know how to, or will not follow directions, as given in the advertisement. In nearly every ACCT sponsored presidential search advertisement, there appears, IN BOLD PRINT, the following (or words to that effect), "Applicants should state in writing how they meet the following criteria. COMPLIANCE WILL ENHANCE CONSIDERATION." This directive does not say, "A response to the following criteria must be found in the candidate's resume." It has become apparent to me that many candidates read our request as, "If it is found in my resume, I don't need to respond." That is not at all what the advertisement requests. Thus the candidate following this line of reasoning has already shot himself or herself in the foot. Other candidates put themselves at an immediate disadvantage with typographical errors, poor grammar, or by leaving some criteria without a response. The lack of a response will necessarily raise questions in the reader's mind. Remember that in most cases, the team of readers have never met you and do not know of your abilities. Therefore, your application must be letter perfect. Almost perfect will not carry the day for you. What board wants to employ a president who cannot follow directions or is sloppy in production? The competition is just too keen to take a chance on an applicant who has already exposed potential flaws.

While keeping Meardy's excellent advice in mind, the following suggestions may further enhance one's chances of being seriously considered for the presidency.

Have your letter and application typed. It is amazing that someone will seek a position with an annual salary of $70,000 or $80,000 and will not spend the few dollars it costs to have an application typed, for it is well worth the cost. Make a copy of the application and complete it before completing the original copy. By completing the copy, you can make sure that the information will fit into the spaces provided. One consultant states: "As simple as it may seem, not developing a 'professional looking' application packet is a common error made by individuals applying for the presidency."

Write the letter of application for the position for which you are applying. A quote from a consultant who has literally reviewed thousands of applications serves to make this point. "I have seen the same letter used to apply for the presidency of a small rural college with an enrollment of under 1,000 and to an urban community college with thousands and thousands of students and very complex dynamics." Another consultant sees a common error as, "Sending the same application (no matter how good) to every opening across the country." No matter how good the application package is, consultants soon recognize the same package and an "Oh no, not again" syndrome develops among consultants. I have seen *exactly* the same package go to four different colleges in one state. Develop "original" applications for each situation.

Pay careful attention to the "profile" developed for the position. The criteria for positions published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and elsewhere should be read carefully and each point should be spoken to specifically. As pointed out rather dramatically in the Meardy quote, today more and more governing boards and college search committees are developing a rather specific list of characteristics and qualifications they are seeking in a president. Some candidates fail to understand that governing boards and consultants put a lot of effort and money into developing the profile for the position and consider it to be very important. To quote a consultant: "It is almost as if some applicants can't read, even though they may possess a Ph.D. degree. The other conclusion would be that there is no concern for the request for information, which is equally as damaging."

Have someone check your grammar. Spelling errors are very common on applications for presidencies. Grammatical mistakes such as subject-verb agreement, while less common, are

deadly when made. While community college presidents may not be scholars in the traditional sense of the term, they are expected to be able to write a letter of application that is free from grammatical errors.

Do not leave gaps in your employment history without a proper explanation. If you spent two years in the military service, list the two years; if you took three years off to concentrate on raising a family, list the time off and explain what you were doing. If you returned to graduate school, let the search committee know this. Search committees should not be expected to guess what someone did for a couple of years. Indeed, most search committees will not guess; they will simply eliminate the application that is incomplete or confusing.

Either list your current supervisor as a reference or explain why you do not. The fact that you may view the supervisor as incompetent is not a good enough reason for not listing the person. Most careful search processes demand that a check be made with one's current supervisor. The reference check of the supervisor may be delayed, upon request, pending your making the "final cut" for the interview. If you desire that the reference check of the immediate supervisor be delayed, make the request at the time you submit your application.

Do not try to incorporate your life's history into your letter of application. If you wish to include a statement of your educational philosophy, do so in an attachment *or as specified* in the directions outlined in the position announcement. If you include a statement on your educational philosophy, be careful and be brief. The statement should be well written and grammatically correct. Avoid what one consultant calls "high school level essays about your philosophy of education." Another consultant warns against including a photograph taken for another purpose. For example, the picture taken for the college yearbook, while very attractive, just might not be appropriate for your application some 15 years later. The best advice is not to include a photo unless one is requested.

Do not send too many "25 centers." The practice of sending out multiple applications by rationalizing that they only cost a postage stamp is a poor one. That is, be careful about flooding the market with applications for positions in which you have little interest. As is true in being late with your application, word gets around when you casually apply for practically every position that comes along. On the other hand, do not be bashful about applying for positions if you feel they are professionally correct for you. Some deans have been interviewed as many as seven, eight, nine, ten times before obtaining a presidency.

The Interview Process: Common Mistakes

Prepare for the interview. You should be familiar with the institution to which you apply. Preparing for the interview includes knowing about the enrollment, programs of study, composition of the faculty and staff, budget, service region, results of recent self-studies, assets, liabilities, and other relevant information. One consultant advises presidential candidates to "Study the auditor's report and don't hesitate to ask penetrating questions" (Weintraub, 1987). Write the institution for information on the college; write the Chamber of Commerce or similar organizations for information on the area. A good approach is to subscribe to the local newspapers as far in advance of the interview as possible. You should also subscribe to weekly or semiweekly newspapers if you are applying to a college located in a rural area, and subscribe to newspapers that cater primarily to minorities, if such papers exist in the college's service region. Know the names and positions of the trustees in advance and, if possible, know the constituency each trustee represents. For example, if you have a black trustee from a black section of the city, you should not be shocked when asked a question related to how the community college should serve blacks. (It may be doing quite well: you should know that, however.) Know the local, state, and national political leaders and their relationship to the college.

Do not criticize your current president. Word gets around if you do; moreover, criticisms of the person for whom you work may be taken as a sign of disloyalty and even incompetency on your part. If something is wrong at your current college, you should be playing a major role in correcting the problem rather than criticizing the current president.

Do not give the impression that you are trying to leave a place. Rather than giving the impression that you want to leave your current position, convey the message that you are interested in furthering your professional career by moving into the presidency. Most colleges do not want a person as president who is running away from his or her current position.

Be yourself during the interview, but do not work too hard at being just "one of the guys or one of the gals." Relax some, but not too much. Do not take off your coat, or loosen your tie if you are a male, or otherwise "make yourself comfortable," no matter what invitation is extended to you by those doing the interviewing. (The invitation to be casual could conceivably be a "trap" designed to see what you view as proper dress for a president in a formal situation.) Do not smoke unless it is a very, very informal situation and unless several others present are smoking.

Be a good listener. Respond to the question you are asked; answer the question and shut up. For example, if you are asked how you would handle a potential legal problem, give a brief answer; do not respond with briefs on all of the cases dealing with the question at hand. As one well-known former chancellor and present consultant for presidential searches observes: "Too many candidates work at being profound—too profound."

Never talk down to anyone who is interviewing you. This advice is especially true when you talk with the governing board. In this regard, remember that you have the primary responsibility to adapt to the interviewer and not vice versa. On the other hand, you need to be subtly in control of how the interview progresses. Do not play up to one particular trustee, even if you know the person well. You may win one vote but lose a dozen. Ideally, the interview should be a conversation with the focus on you, the candidate.

Make sure you are prepared to take the position if it is offered, assuming it is professionally right for you and the college. This suggestion does not imply that every position you apply for is the right one for you and should be accepted if offered. But reject the position for professional reasons, not because you cannot take the children

out of school, sell your house, afford the current mortgage rate, or leave your mother-in-law. You are already aware that these situations represent potential problems; deal with them *before* you apply for a position. Again, word gets around among consultants and board members, so if you drop out of one presidential race because of existing personal reasons, you may be hurt when you apply for future positions. If you are not willing to move unless your spouse can find a suitable position in the new community, state this in your application and during the interview, but not *after* the position is offered.

When All Else Is Considered . . . .

Following the above suggestions will in no way guarantee that you will obtain a community college presidency; however, these suggestions may well help you avoid "shooting yourself in the foot," to use William Meardy's descriptive phrase. By avoiding needless errors, using good judgment in preparing for the presidency, working hard, being in the right place at the right time, and having a bit of luck, you can likely obtain the community college presidency, assuming of course that the interview indicates that the "chemistry" or "fit" is right between you, the college board, the college community, and the community at large.

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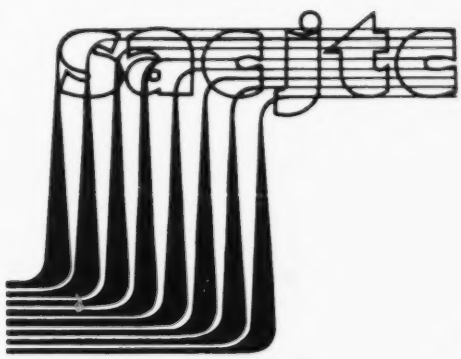
George B. Vaughan is director of the Center for Community College Education at George Mason University. Prior to assuming his current position, he served as president of Piedmont Virginia Community College for almost eleven years. An expanded version of the above discussion will appear in his forthcoming book on the community college presidency to be published by ACE/ Macmillan in 1989.

Additional copies of this occasional paper may be obtained by writing the editor, care of Piedmont Virginia Community College, Charlottesville, Virginia 22901. Copies are three dollars each, including mailing. Make checks payable to SACJTC.



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